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Peer-tutoring and Tertiary ESL Learners

Nurhidayah Mohd Sharif^{a,*}, Mohamad Hassan Zakaria^b, Wan Fara Adlina Wan
Mansor^c, Norul Alima Nordin^d, Ng Siew Fong^e, Hema Rosheny Mustafa^f

^{a,b,c,d,e,f}Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 Johor, Malaysia

Abstract

This paper intends to describe the nature of activities conducted, tutor factors, English language use, and benefits of the peer-tutoring program. Tutor's participant-observation and tutees' responses to interviews were gathered and interpreted. The findings revealed that the peer-tutoring program was a conducive platform for students to practice the language. The study offers valuable insights into the improvement of tertiary English Second Language (ESL) classroom practice, syllabus design and materials development. The findings suggest that students learnt best when learning centers around them. The authors argue that the environment surrounding the teaching and learning process plays a big role in the acquisition process and increases meaningful language use. This paper concludes that peer-tutoring can be a powerful support program in promoting language use among university students.

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1. Introduction and Background

Having an ability to communicate well is one of the main requirements to be tertiary literate. It is a must for university students to be equipped with such ability given that it has a great impact towards their future career development. The graduates are believed to be able to perform productively in the society too with this ability in hand, notwithstanding what contexts they are in. This is to ensure that they would be able to function in line with the complex world of today. However there is a serious deficiency in English proficiency among university

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +60134799808 .

E-mail address: nhidayahmsharif@gmail.com

graduates particularly in speaking. As tertiary ESL learners, they can learn communication skills and other related skills from the available programs on campus.

In addressing the commonly cited problem with the lack of proficiency among Malaysian university students, numerous initiatives have been introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education in working towards producing quality graduates. Such initiatives are in the forms of curriculum innovation, support programs, integration of generic skills into the curriculum, co-curriculum which are exclusively developed and introduced by the university administration with the intention to address the lack of proficiency in English and other related skills among university students.

This study examines peer-tutoring program called Friends of English (FoE) at a Malaysia university. This is the university support program meant to provide a room for university students to put English language into practice with their peers within friendly and meaningful environments. Such environments, in some ways, motivate the students to use the language more. The paper focuses on three components of the program, namely, the nature of activities, tutor factors and language use.

There is a significant benefit to the students' proficiency when the language is used in social interactions since it provides responsive and linguistically complex atmosphere which familiarizes the learners with the language norms [1]. The lack of language practice would negatively affect the students' ability to transfer the learning outside the classroom walls, especially for adult ESL learners [2]. English courses and programs at tertiary level, thus, have to provide students with essential knowledge and skills of language.

These efforts taken by the university support program are meaningful as they encourage the functional aspect of the language [3] so that the students would be able to transfer and apply the learning outside the program [4]. The nature of the activities conducted in the programs are friendly and unthreatening which would intrinsically trigger the students' motivation [4;5] and produce better results among the students [6], hence, resulting in individual development [7]. The absence of such elements in the formal English class is actually the reason for its ineffectiveness.

In terms of the activities conducted in the program, the *speaking in action* approach guarantees the use of language to the fullest. This approach needs to deal with different learning situations [8;9] and this allows for various kinds of activities to be carried out. The activities too will be more effective in a *game-based* manner because it stimulates the students' interest and motivation in learning. By this, the learning environment will be more comfortable, positive and less threatening in which it encourages the students to optimize language use. Chen [10] also supports this view as he believes that this way of learning could reduce anxiety in using English, thus, through optimizing language use, the students would be fluent. In other words, the activities should be derived from the holistic learning approach as suggested by Hirsh [11] so that the process of learning would be natural and meaningful which later can promote individual development [7] to the highest degree.

In order to promote language use among tertiary students, the activities designed should be based on the *students' life experiences*. These reflective activities offer the students to revisit their past life experiences to understand and make judgment of the present situations which will influence their further action and beliefs [12], to share ideas and discuss with their peers. The language production would definitely be leveled up because by collaboratively interacting with peers in sharing their experiences; the students would be active in making meaning [13].

The presence of appropriate instructors or tutors for the programs is also crucial. In this study, the tutors were the peers who are more proficient in English compared to the tutees. Peers are believed to provide more effective learning because they have experienced the same kind of learning problems previously [14] which may lead them to be more sensitive and responsive to the tutees' target language needs. Basically, peer-tutoring is a process of having peer tutors to help their tutees in any specific fields that the tutees are lacking in. The tutors do not need to be experts in the field that they are going to tutor but they at least must possess better proficiency than their tutees [15].

The close age gap between the tutees and their tutors is one of the factors for their willingness to use the language [16;17]. Unlike in an English class, the teachers are much older and superior which results in intimidation and fear for the students to use the language. The tutees, on one hand, have the opportunity to build friendship with their tutors due to small age gap, and on the other, the tutees would not feel intimidated if their mistakes were pointed out. In terms of giving feedbacks, it is best for the tutor to highlight the tutees' major mistakes only so that, it would not hinder their language production as confirmed by Truscott [18] where too many corrections could bring negative effects to the development of students' inter-language.

The interactions among students in small groups with interesting and meaningful topics to talk about would require an optimum use of language. Another aspect that motivates them to use the language is that the interactions are only among peers, so, less attention would be paid to the language form as long as they get the message across. Due to the issue of form, the students tend to feel threatened and afraid to interact and convey their ideas to teachers or instructors as pointed out by Piaget in his socio-cognitive theories on small group learning conflict [19]. On the whole, the more language the students use, the more they will get used to it [3].

The students' interactions with their friends call for "loops of feedbacks" [20] which means they give, receive and respond to the feedbacks. This action triggers their cognitive processing and requires them to play active role in their learning [20]. This dynamic process of learning happens because it is learner-centered in nature [21]. The experiencing of language is assured to result in better language proficiency [22]. In short, it can be said that peer tutoring is a powerful 3-in-1 learning platform seeing that it includes the development of transferable, social and communication skills. [14;23].

2. The Study

Using data from participant observation and interviews, the researchers seek to answer the following research questions:

- How are the activities conducted in the program?
- What are the tutor factors that facilitate the program?
- How is the language used in the program?

Data were gathered in a language support unit at one institution of higher learning in Malaysia which organized a peer-tutoring program named Friends of English (FoE). This program was set up to promote the English language usage among university students with the intention of enhancing the undergraduates' English proficiency. The tutors for the program are the second-year to fourth-year TESL students who are carefully selected and appointed by the institution while the tutees are the first-year to fourth-year UTM undergraduates who enrolled themselves in the program. The maximum number for tutees per tutor is five. The tutors are responsible in providing opportunities for the tutees to use the language maximally based on their own syllabus within one hour time allocated for every FoE session at an agreed time and place. Although there is no syllabus provided, there are still several rules that must be followed by tutors as to maximize the tutees' use of language.

There were two groups; group A and B participated for 8 weeks FoE sessions. This study is a case study of four tutees in which there were two tutees per group. The tutees consisted of two male and two female within the age range of 19 to 21 years old. One of the researchers was the tutor, there were all eight activities conducted throughout the eight weeks program for eight FoE sessions namely:

- Introduce yourselves
- Pop speech
- Role play
- Hot topic
- Story behind it
- Why do I chose this instead of the other
- Can I help you? and

- Get to Know Yourself Better.

The activities conducted were developed by the tutor based on three approaches: game, personal experience and speaking in action approach.

In responding to the research questions, there were two methods used in order to investigate the tutor's and tutees' perspectives on the FoE program. As to discover the tutor's viewpoint, her field-notes from the participant-observation were analyzed. This method is believed to describe the in-group stories in detailed by which the tutor provided meaning to her developed activities, role as tutor, assessed the students' experiences especially in language practices and outcomes, and the benefits of the program. In discovering the tutees' perspectives, close-ended interviews were conducted. The responses from the interviews were analyzed in order to describe the three components of the program: the nature of activities conducted, tutor factors and language use. The data were qualitatively analyzed and descriptively interpreted.

3. Findings and Discussion

The following data from field notes and interview responses were gathered to answer this first research question: How are the activities conducted in the program?

Table 1 Summary of findings and discussion for first research question

Field notes	Interview Responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "It seemed like the students managed to use the language maximally in every activity." • "The nature of each activity was very fun and exciting and this made the students felt free to make use of the language." • "The students enjoyed the game-based activities very much because they want to accomplish the game's goal instead of thinking what they want to say. This might be the main reason for them to put the language in use a lot." • "In personal approach activities, the students had a lot of things to share with their friends because they have experienced them." • "Students have the opportunities to experience language in many situations in the speaking in action approach. This kind of activity can help the students to be able to practice the language when they are in the real world later." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tutees perceived the activities conducted in every session as interesting and fun. • The tutees viewed each type of the activity as successful in helping them making use of the language at the fullest. • The game-based activities made the learning to be fun, unthreatened and interesting . • This type of activity encouraged the students to use the language without having to feel restless. • The personal approach activities managed to open more chances for tutees to use the language. • This type of activities gave lots of ideas for the mentees to share with their friends. • As for the speaking in action approach, the students agreed that the activities provided the knowledge on how language is used in various contexts. • They agreed that the activities are meaningful and practical which would be helpful for them to transfer whatever they have learnt in the program to any living contexts.

The analysis from both participant observation and interview shows that every activity designed by the tutor provides opportunities for the tutees to use the target language to the fullest. There were three approaches used for the activities: game, personal experience and speaking in action approach. The analysis suggests that in game-based activities, the tutees enjoyed their learning very much. The environments appeared to be fun and nonthreatening. They used language optimally and freely which maybe because they were more focused on achieving the goal of the game instead of what they were saying [10].

As for the personal approach, the students seemed to have plenty to say about the things they have experienced. They were more interested in thinking about what to share with their friends rather than how to say or what they wanted to say [12]. Thus, they definitely took charge of their own learning. Such activities gave a sense of meaning to the students [13] seeing that it deals with their own life experiences which they could relate and construct meaning.

The speaking in action approach on the other hand, gave the students opportunities to experience language in various contexts [8;9]. Such approach is meaningful for them as they can definitely transfer the learning to real life contexts [2]. The results showed that the tutees viewed each type of the activity as successful in helping them making use of the language to the fullest.

As a conclusion, it is believed that the nature of the activities was responsible for the maximum use of the target language among the tutees. This is because the activities managed to gauge them and motivate them to be active from the beginning until the end of the activity. For that reason, intrinsic motivation was subconsciously developed within each tutee. Thus, it was easy for the tutees to bring their learning to various contexts to the outside world.

The following data from field notes and interview responses were gathered to answer this second research question: What are the tutor factors that facilitate the program?

Table 2 Summary of findings and discussion for second research question

Field notes	Interview Responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The students seemed to be comfortable sharing their learning problems with the mentor. The students looked as if they understand well what have been explained by the mentor.” • “The students small age gap with the mentor has made the students felt more convenience to converse with their friends in English” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In terms of tutor, the tutees agreed that the tutor managed to provide such a friendly and unthreatening environment while conducting the activities. • They claimed that she is approachable and easy to be brought into any kinds of discussion regarding language. • They also believed that the close age gap was the reason for them to be more convenient to discuss their learning problems and to use the language in that less intimidating environment. • The tutees also admitted the relationship had gone beyond the tutor-tutees relationship since they have become friends.

From the findings, it was found that the tutees were comfortable to share their language problems with the tutor, even when the problems sometimes were not even related to the activities or when they were confused about issues on language use or have a hard time comprehending. This might be because the tutees were more open to their tutor knowing that the tutor might have experienced similar learning problems as they did [14]. Above and beyond that, the narrow age gap was the main reason the tutees could relate well to the tutor compared to their teachers or lecturers. Thus, the tutees felt more comfortable having a peer to help them learning the target language [16;17].

It is apparent that the tutees and tutor have become friends as the name of the program suggests: Friends of English. This is because the tutees can get hold of companionship [17] from their peer tutor plus their same age range factor causes the building of the friend rapport to be easier. It could be concluded that the tutor played a main role in helping the tutees using the language

The following data from field notes and interview responses were gathered to answer this third research question: How is the language used in the program?

Table 3 Summary of findings and discussion for third research question

Field notes	Interview Responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Only major mistakes were corrected so that it would not hinder their language production and affect their learning motivation” • “Whenever the mentor corrected the students, they were very receptive and positive.” • “The tutees were very interactive and responsive. They were active in giving feedbacks to the other tutees.” • “The interactions were very lively between the mentor and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tutees claimed that the tutor only correct their major mistakes in language production. • They appreciated the corrections very much and hoping to get more feedbacks from the tutor. • For the language use and proficiency aspect, the tutees agreed that they have been provided with a lot of opportunities to use the language throughout the program. • They believed that they are more confident and willing to use the

mentees which definitely involved with a lot of language use.”	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The students improved a lot in terms of their language production compared to the earlier weeks. They seemed to think before they made their utterances. They were more fluent and less hesitate while using the language.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language to the outside world situations. • The tutees agreed that there was a dynamic group interaction with a high involvement of English language between tutor-tutees and also tutees-tutees • They also believed that their language proficiency have improved a lot compared to the earlier weeks through the maximum use of language which is impossible in formal English classroom.

It can be seen in the findings that, the tutor merely correcting the tutees’ major mistakes in their English language as to direct the tutees to the correct way of language use. They did not seem to mind the tutor’s efforts at correcting their mistakes; in fact they encouraged the tutor to do that more often. This is because, they feel intrinsically motivated [4;5] to learn the language.

The data illustrated that the feedback given by the tutor and their peers lead to positive language development. The tutees were very receptive to the responses. This result confirms the loop of feedbacks [20] which may lead to active involvement in the learning process and highly stimulate their cognitive processing [21]. This fact also supports Piaget’s socio-cognitive theories and the benefits gained from small group learning conflict [19].

It is believed that the active interactions within the group made them socially close to each other [23] and more familiar in using the target language among themselves. Besides that, it was apparent that the tutees were comfortable with the tutor as their language instructor due to the friendly surroundings [4;5] they felt when they were with the tutor who always motivated them to use the target language actively.

In the final weeks, it was noticeable that the tutees seemed to use better language compared to the earlier weeks [7]. The language structures were improved as they were more aware of their language use [22]. They were less hesitant in their speeches while delivering their ideas or discussing certain issues presented, knowing that they are more familiar to the language and did not need much time to think before they spoke. This may be the outcomes coming from motivation [4;5] that they have gained from the peer tutoring experiences.

Classroom contexts normally prevents learners from practicing the language and transferring their learning to real life contexts [1;2;23]. The formal class that focuses on the students’ subject matter in some ways interferes the main purpose of learning language since they are more likely to be attracted to the content instead of the language itself. In brief, it could be said that the dynamic process of experiencing the language has led to the rapid enhancement of language proficiency [22;23].

4. Conclusion

This paper shows that peer-tutoring support program is a great way of encouraging tertiary students to practice the target language in order to improve their language proficiency. The findings in general suggest that the nature of the activities that are unthreatening and less-intimidating, compared to the more rigid classroom setting, has encouraged the students to put the language into practice. In addition, the activities approach as well offer plenty of opportunities for the tutees to use the language. Other than that, tutor factors (strong support system, small age gap difference, good rapport and sensitivity to the tutees’ learning problems) lead to tutees’ willingness to use English. Such friendly environments made tutees feel comfortable to talk. The program, overall, seemed to benefit the students in equipping them with knowledge and skills beyond language which reflects the individual development since peer-tutoring is a transferable, social and communication skills. With such competences the students would have better chances to function in the competitive market for their future employments.

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